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ABSTRACT

One way to identify the essential Mina Shaughnessy would be to look at her views in light of the conflicts of the 1970s. It is particularly revealing to compare Shaughnessy to another great basic writing pioneer of that decade, K. Patricia Cross, whose 1971 book "Beyond the Open Door" Shaughnessy lists as a suggested reading in "Errors and Expectations." First, Cross approaches her subject from the perspective of a social scientist, while Shaughnessy approaches hers from the perspective of a humanities scholar. Cross's tone is often impersonal and scientific; Shaughnessy's is personal, poetic, and passionate. Second, Cross's definition of "new students" is mathematical: they are the lowest third of the nation's high school graduates. Shaughnessy bases her definition of "new students" on her own personal experiences as an instructor at City College of New York. Third, according to Cross, the major obstacles to the progress of "new students" are their lack of academic ability and their resulting lack of effort. To Shaughnessy, however, "new students" lack neither ability or effort; rather, they mainly lack experience. For this, she blames the educational system. Fourth, Cross envisioned a two-track college system that would accommodate "new students" without necessarily making them proficient in mainstream academic skills. Shaughnessy, by contrast, believed "new students" could succeed in the mainstream curriculum. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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IN SEARCH OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY:

A COMPARISON OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY AND K. PATRICIA CROSS

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IN SEARCH OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY:

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Mina Shaughnessy has long been revered as the leader, even founder, of the basic writing movement. Thus, in this time of impending crisis in basic education, many in the field are seeking to understand her essential position more fully, debating, for example, about whether or not Shaughnessy was "radical" or "conservative." Such debates, however, often serve but to politicize the present basic writing classroom. In fact, Shaughnessy can be viewed either as radical for caring so much about and believing in her students, most of whom were minorities, (as Paul Hunter maintains) or as conservative for wanting to acculturate them (the view of Min-Zhan Lu).

Perhaps another way to identify the essential Shaughnessy, then, is not in terms of 1990s' politics, but in light of the conflicts of the 1970s, the decade of which she was a part. It is, I believe, particularly revealing to compare Shaughnessy to another great basic education pioneer of that decade, K. Patricia Cross, whose 1971 book Beyond The Open Door Shaughnessy lists as a suggested reading in Errors and Expectations and whose 1976 Accent on Learning further details Cross's views. Both Cross and Shaughnessy were staunch advocates of open admissions and of the students who, once admitted to postsecondary institutions under these policies, were often placed in "remedial programs."

(Because these students would not have been admitted to colleges before the special policies, Cross terms them New Students--capitalized; Shaughnessy sometimes refers to uncapitalized "new students," but discusses them mainly as the "basic writers" in her remedial English program.) In Cross' and Shaughnessy's publications about these New Students, we find striking contrasts.

First contrast: Cross's and Shaugnessy's approaches to the subject. In short, we could say that Cross approaches her subject from the perspective of a social scientist, Shaughnessy from that of the humanities. Cross, an undergraduate math major, held a doctorate in psychology and was an administrator at the University of California, Berkley. Her works present her as an observer of the New Students from "above," so to speak, gaining most of her knowledge about them through "instruments" and "samples" and the data banks of past research.

Cross's tone is, correspondingly, often impersonal and scientific. These two sentences give a flavor of much of her writing: "Another reality factor that bears on the statistical model presented is regional variation in retention rates. . . . The longitudinal growth study conducted by ETS [Educational Testing Service] provides an excellent opportunity to examine empirical data. . . . " (OD 19-20). Her concern, Cross says, is to provide "sound analysis" as opposed to "emotional advocacy" (AL 200).

In contrast, Shaughnessy's education was in the humanities--she held a an M.A. in English literature--and her experience with

open admissions students was first-hand--from 1967 to 1975 she was director and instructor of basic writing at CCNY. In her articles and in Errors and Expectations, Shaughnessy makes no secret of her distrust of quantification, of the "alphabet of numbers, syntax of printouts, transformations of graphs and tables" (OA/DT 104). She writes personally, poetically and passionately. Her descriptions of the New Students are based on her own classroom experiences: "I remember sitting in the worn urban classroom where my students had just written their first essays and where I now began to read them. . . . But the writing was so stunningly unskilled that I could not begin to define the task. . . . I could only sit there, reading and re-reading the alien papers, wondering what had gone wrong. . . ." (EE vii).

Second contrast: their definitions of the New Students. Cross's definition is mathematical: the New Students are those ranked in "the lowest third of high school graduates on traditional [national] tests of academic achievement" (OD 12, AonL, 4). According to her "research profile," these students represent a diverse population: 25% are black, 15% are other minorities, and over half are Caucasion (AL 6). Although most come from educationally and financially impoverished homes, over 25% have fathers who attended college (OD 16). In the 1976 Accent on Learning, Cross indeed takes issue with those who narrow the definition: "One of the most persistent misunderstandings of the educational community . . . is that most New Students are members of minority ethnic groups. That is not true: . . . . Research clearly demonstrates . . . that the

overwhelming majority of low achievers who gained admission to college through open admissions policies were not ethnic minorities . . .[but] white. . . ." (AL 6 and 34). And she warns that the identification of remedial programs with ethnic minorities will result in "a tremendous pressure to 'prove'" that remedial education is successful. Under such pressure, she says, scientific objectivity will become lost in "fires of emotionalism" (AL 34).

Shaughnessy bases her descriptions of New Students on her own classroom experiences at CCNY. Her students were, she writes in Errors and Expectations, of "a different order" from traditional students, "as if they had come . . . from a different country. . . . Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial conclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialects at home" (EE 2-3). Whether she intended to or not, with such descriptions of her students and then her generalized statements about "basic writing students," Shaughnessy popularized an image of the New Students in remedial programs as urban minorities of lower socioeconomic status. Clearly her picture is in startling contrast to the ethnic and economic diversity described by Cross--indeed, it is the very view that Cross warns against.

Third contrast: the reasons for the New Students' academic underachievement. According to Cross's research, the major obstacles to New Students' learning is their lack of academic ability and their resulting lack of effort. (In fact, Cross cites a 1969 study of high-risk students at CUNY which reported that

"dropouts from the program studied fewer hours per week than survivors"--and were aware that they were studying less--OD 29). But Cross cites other reasons for the New Students' low academic achievement as well, including (in order of times mentioned by administrators on one of her surveys) 1) poor home background; 2) poor elementary and secondary schooling; 3) fear of failure; 4) more interest in nonacademic matters such as car, sports, job; and 5) jobs that take away time and energy from study (BOD 27).

Cross does not blame society for the academic failure of the New Students, nor does she see any prejudice against lower socio-economic groups: the fact that 25% of the New Students come from advantaged homes, she says, reveals as a fallacy the assumption that "traditional education has served the priviledged classes well and the disadvantaged poorly" (OD 16).

Shaughnessy tells a different story. She explicitly rejects two of Cross's reasons: first, the New Students' lack of effort/interest--she insists that her students are NOT "indifferent to . . . academic excellence"; and second, lack of ability--her students are NOT "slow," "non-verbal," or "incapable" (EE 5). Rather, she focuses on one explanation for their underachievement: inexperience. Throughout Errors and Expectations, she points to her basic writers' lack of practice not only with the physical act of writing but also "with written sentence patterns" (66) that are not "part of [their] native speech" (72) or "dialect" (45).

Shaughnessy DOES blame society for this situation: she argues that the New Students' academic weaknesses are a result of

the schools' "unconscionable failure to meet the educational needs of the poor and dark-skinned" (MT 110).

Fourth contrast: their views of how academe should deal with the New Students. Cross seems to accept the inevitability of the New Students' relatively low academic achievement. However, she argues that academic ability per se is not the only talent worthy of cultivation (OD 16). Colleges should not always simply try to make the New Students into traditional students with remedial courses to remove the deficiencies (OD 5); rather, they should redefine the learning systems, "creat[ing] valid alternatives to traditional curricula," alternatives that can build on the students' strengths--for example, their abilities with people and things (AL 45).

Shaughnessy, however, argues passionately for continuing with remediation programs in order to mainstream the New Students into the traditional curriculum. In presentations to educators and administrators, she insists that these students "are not consigned to their places on the continuum forever"; that, "ripe for learning," they are "capable of both steady growth and dramatic leaps into new levels of competence . . . when given the opportunity. . . ." (MT 111-13).

In the face of the striking differences between these two important 1970s pioneers of basic education, we must no doubt ask--which of them has proved more accurate? There have been amendments of Cross's work: there is greater awareness of cultural biases in the standardized tests, more questioning of

the objective measurability of "academic ability." Likewise, there have been some modifications of Shaughnessy's work: more recent scholars, such as Troyka (as editor-designate of The Journal of Basic Writing in 1984) and Lunsford and Sullivan (1990), have pointed out that basic writers represent various backgrounds and levels of ability; also, as I explained in my 1993 CCCC presentation, educators are paying more attention to factors besides inexperience that can cause academic underachievement. Moreover, the jury is still out on the effectiveness of remedial education.

While the question of the two women's overall accuracy thus remains difficult to judge, there is no doubt regarding Shaughnessy's great power and influence in building the remedial education movement. A major reason may be her intense, almost religious conviction as she expressed her views. Shaughnessy herself used a religious metaphor to describe her defense of remediation programs to skeptical English faculty. She saw herself as "preaching religion to the unconverted" (ETM 92) and to those who had given in to "a theology of despair" (OA/DT 104). Continuing Shaughnessy's religious metaphor, I submit that Shaughnessy established her sense of the New Students' potential not only on observation but on a kind of faith: just as she felt "in her bones" (MT 114) that meritocracy was wrong, so she felt "in her bones" that "teaching [these students] to write well is not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (DI 239).

Just as religion can lead individuals to great

accomplishments, so out of Shaughnessy's faith came great pedagogical strides. In Errors and Expectations, she combined her inspiring expressions of faith with practical descriptions of teaching strategies that continue to be an invaluable guide for teachers today. Thus I would argue that Shaughnessy's essential identity is that of an idealist who sought not so much to describe America's New Students in a quantifiable and, to her mind, deterministic way, as to make her heartfelt personal vision of "what ought to be" a reality.

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